

## **Selective Enrollment and Magnet School Admission Policy Blue Ribbon Committee Final Report**

Since 1980, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Desegregation Consent Decree mandated a race-based admission policy for magnet and selective enrollment schools. On September 24, 2009, United States District Court Judge Charles P. Kocoras vacated the decree, recognizing CPS's longstanding efforts to desegregate as many schools as practicable and to develop and maintain integrated magnet and selective enrollment programs. The timing of this ruling necessitated an immediate change in CPS policy, to be implemented for the 2010-2011 school year. As a result, CPS opted to implement a one-year policy with the intention to review at the completion of the school year, soliciting public input and revising as necessary. To this end, CPS put together a Blue Ribbon Committee (BRC) to evaluate the success of the one-year policy and make recommendations for revisions based on its analysis and feedback from the public. The members of this committee included:

- Alderman Latasha Thomas, 17<sup>th</sup> Ward, and Education Committee Chairman
- Alderman Freddrenna Lyle, 6<sup>th</sup> ward
- Miguel Del Valle, City Clerk
- Anna Alvarado, Principal of Hawthorne Elementary
- Alan Mather, Principal of Lindblom Math & Science Academy
- Cynthia Flowers, Black Star Community PTA
- Lisa Scruggs Esq. Jenner & Block
- Bertha Magana, JD, Latino Education Alliance
- Dr. Mary Davidson, PhD, Retired

The BRC convened in July of 2010, and met regularly throughout July and August. The BRC hosted three community forums during this time to understand the views and concerns of the public. Transcripts of these public forums are attached to this report.

The goal of the Blue Ribbon Committee was to identify and recommend solutions that will provide equitable access to the schools impacted by 2009 policy by (1) evaluating the results of the trial year Magnet and Selective Enrollment Admissions Policy (09-1216-P03) and (2) hearing the concerns expressed by parents, educators and community members during the community forums. The entire process was an extremely difficult one and the BRC concedes that even under the best circumstances, its recommendations will not satisfy all those interested in seeking placement at CPS magnet and selective enrollment schools.

One theme was reiterated throughout the process and the BRC's work: CPS parents and the entire community as a whole will ultimately benefit when every single school within the Chicago Public School system is a viable option for parents seeking academic rigor in a safe environment. Therefore, the system's top priority should be to raise academic standards and the means to achieve them district wide. Until that day, however, the existing policy can and should be improved to ensure equitable access to the system's magnet schools and selective enrollment high schools.

Given the timeframe allotted for its work, the BRC agreed to focus on a limited scope. A summary of the BRC's findings and recommendations are set forth below:

## Magnet School Issues

- **Non-entry Level Siblings**

- **Background:** Historically, the admission policy for magnet schools has set aside 45% of available seats for siblings, at all grade levels. This policy has helped families stay together, simplifying transportation needs for families with multiple children.
- **2010-2011 Policy:** The 2010-2011 Admission policy provided no sibling consideration for any non-entry level children (upper grades were simply handled through a general lottery). In addition, there was no magnet school Principal Discretion.
- **BRC Findings:** This year, without principal discretion, siblings felt they had very little chance to actually get in. This policy caused considerable concern for parents. The BRC recognizes the frustration parents have in transporting multiple children to multiple schools, and would like to accommodate them. At the same time, the BRC is concerned that if the sibling policy at entry level is to admit all siblings, and there is sibling preference at upper grades, eventually these schools may become accessible only to children from certain families or neighborhoods.
- **BRC Recommendation:** **The BRC recommends providing a sibling preference at the non-entry level. This could be done by holding a percentage of seats for siblings, and then holding a general lottery for the remaining seats, or by allowing Magnet School Principals to use Principal Discretion to accept non-entry level siblings.**

- **Multiples**

- **Background:** Historically, Principals would accept multiples (twins, triplets, etc) when waitlists became inactive (after June 30) if there were still spots available.
- **2010-2011 Policy:** Waitlist remained active throughout the school year. Also, Principal Discretion was eliminated. Without either one of these avenues, this year there was no recourse for a situation when one twin got in, but the other did not.
- **BRC Findings:** The BRC discussed several potential solutions, including automatic admission—if one receives an offer, both will be admitted; putting multiples on the same application—picked together or not at all; and reinstating magnet school principal discretion to address the issue. The BRC decided that the fairest way to handle would be to tie multiples together on the same application. This ensures that multiples will either gain acceptance together, or will be right next to each other on the school's waitlist, increasing their chances of gaining acceptance together.
- **BRC Recommendation:** **The BRC recommends placing multiples on the same application.** Multiples will only have one application and one chance in the lottery (vs. a chance for each child). If parents want their children to stand alone, they may do so, but no accommodation will be made if only one of their children gets in. The BRC

recognizes that multiples could tie up a significant number of seats if they receive acceptance offers to multiple schools. Multiples should be required to accept/decline offers in a timely manner as to make sure other students have an opportunity to fill those seats.

- **Non-Entry grade admission**

- **Background:** Historically, the policy at non-entry grades has been the same as the policy at entry level.
- **2010-2011 Policy:** The 2010-2011 Admission policy had only a general lottery for the upper level grades.
- **BRC Findings:** The BRC reviewed the number of non-entry seats at each school and noted that the number of seats is fairly small (generally less than 5). The exception to this observation is the 7<sup>th</sup> grade level, where more turnover occurs due to student transfers into Academic Centers, which include grades 7 and 8. The BRC felt that imposing the tier system at the upper grades would not be meaningful when dealing with such a small number of seats.
- **BRC Recommendation:** The BRC recommends using a general lottery for the small number of non-entry level seats. Using the entry level policy could be considered when there are enough seats to potentially affect diversity (for instance 4 or more).

- **Proximity Percentage**

- **Background:** Historically, schools would hold a proximity lottery if less than 30% of the entire school fell within the proximity area boundary of that school (defined as 1.5 miles for elementary magnets and 2.5 for high school magnets). If more than 30% of students were within the proximity area, the proximity applicants were defaulted into the school's general lottery.
- **2010-2011 Policy:** The 2010-2011 policy increased that percentage to 40%, and allowed all schools to hold the lottery, regardless of their current proximity make up.
- **BRC Findings:** CPS has historically received considerable feedback from parents who live very close to a magnet school, but failed to receive an admission offer because of the competitive nature of the lottery. This year, all students within the proximity of a magnet school were able to compete in a separate lottery—even at schools who haven't run a proximity lottery in years due to the schools' composition. For certain schools, this change had a dramatic and alarming effect on the racial demographics of the acceptance pools. After a thorough review of relevant legal and practical

considerations, the BRC believes this is one area where some consideration of race may be permissible. Annual review of the demographics of each school's proximity area boundary would determine whether a proximity lottery will be implemented. If more than 50% of the entire school population resides within the proximity boundary of the school AND if the racial composition of the school is more than 50% of any one racial group (defined as White, African-American, Hispanic, Asian American or Native American), a proximity lottery would not be implemented at that school for the upcoming admissions year. In the event the district decides that it does not want to utilize a race-based consideration, the original proximity policy could be reinstated—that is, if more than 50% of the school's student population currently resides within the proximity boundary, the proximity lottery would not be implemented for the upcoming admissions year.

- **BRC Recommendation:** The BRC recognizes this is a very important issue, and feels this action can help to contain large swings in diversity caused by some schools being located in homogenized neighborhoods. The BRC recommends creating a trigger to decide whether to implement the proximity lottery from year to year. The trigger would be if more than 50% of the school population currently resides within the proximity boundary AND more than 50% of the school is made up of any one racial group, the proximity lottery would be eliminated for that year. This approach should be carefully monitored and adjusted as necessary from year to year.

- **Principal Discretion**

- **Background:** Historically, Principal discretion was granted to magnet school principals to allow for discretionary offers totaling 5% of the available entry level seats. Principal Discretion selections were made at the time of the lottery, and no student knew whether they received an offer based on a discretionary selection or a lottery selection.
- **2010-2011 Policy:** Principal Discretion was not reinstated for the 2010-2011 Admission Policy
- **BRC Findings:** A number of magnet school principals presented a proposal to the BRC requesting the reinstatement of Principal Discretion. The public expressed opinions both for and against it, and the BRC wrestled with the desire to give principals more autonomy to shape their schools, while providing reasonable and defensible guidelines for selecting individual students outside of the lottery process. All agreed that if reinstated, Principal Discretion should remain at 5%, could be used at any grade level (not just entry level), and should have controls similar to Selective Enrollment High School (SEHS) Principal Discretion protocol. Possible guideline criteria for Magnet school Principal Discretion included enhancing the cultural, socio-economic, racial and

ethnic, and/or special needs population of a school, supporting the family unit of students with multiple siblings of the same birthday, supporting siblings in different grade levels, and allowing for the re-enrollment of families who moved away and are returning to their previous residency, and enhancing parent support and community involvement. However, not all BRC members agreed that these criteria were specific enough to eliminate potential abuses of the system.

- **BRC Recommendation: The BRC could not come to consensus in creating appropriate guidelines for Magnet School Principal Discretion. The BRC recommends that CPS continue to study this issue, with a focus on developing a process similar to that used in selective enrollment high schools with enough controls to eliminate potential abuses.**

### **Selective Enrollment Issues**

- **Increasing ISAT score needed to sit for SEHS exam**
  - **Background:** Historically, any student with stanines of 5 or above on reading and 5 and above on math on the 7<sup>th</sup> grade ISAT has been permitted to take the selective enrollment high school exam (for students with disabilities and students who are designated English Language Learners, CPS policy states that the student's reading and math stanines combined must equal a combination of 10 to qualify for the exam).
  - **2010-2011 Policy:** Same as in past years. Using the current ISAT score requirement results in more than 13,000 testing for a total of 3,000 seats.
  - **BRC Findings:** Raising the ISAT requirement might reduce testing expenses and help curb unrealistic expectations of chances of qualifying for admission. However, the BRC looked at the data and saw over 100 students did get in with at least one 5 stanine. In addition, the BRC recognizes the importance of pushing students to try to succeed. While divided on this issue, the BRC did agree that CPS needs to develop better communication tools and substantive information resources for students, parents, and counselors to help them to make informed decisions and understand the competitiveness of each program.
  - **BRC Recommendation: The BRC recommends better educating counselors, parents, and students on their chances of acceptance at each school by including information on the CPS website, in the application itself, and during school. Specifically, the BRC recommends that CPS create an online tool that allows students and their parents to input their grades and ISAT score to predict what their final composite application score will be and that CPS publicize the cut off score statistics for each school. These are examples of tools that would help parents make better decisions on how to find the best option for their student.**

- **Requiring ISAT for students who transition from private school**

- **Background:** Historically, CPS has allowed private school students to use any nationally normed test (such as the Terra Nova) in place of the ISAT.
- **2010-2011 Policy:** Same as in previous years.
- **BRC Findings:** Because the ISAT is a state administered test, if a student's school does not offer it as a standardized testing measure, there is no real way for the student to schedule it privately. Because of this, there seems to be no real way to mandate that private school students take the ISAT.
- **BRC Recommendation:** The BRC recommends that CPS continue to the practice of allowing private school students to use national normed tests in place of the ISAT if necessary.

- **Reweight the SEHS Rubric**

- **Background:** Historically, the Composite Score for the Selective Enrollment High School Admission process was composed of four factors: ISAT (300 points), 7<sup>th</sup> grade grades (300 points), SEHS exam (300 points), and attendance (100 points) for a total score of 1000 points. Attendance was removed for the 2009-2010 admissions cycle due to the swine flu epidemic, resulting in a maximum composite score of 900 points.
- **2010-2011 Policy:** The 2010-2011 admission policy allots 300 points for the ISAT, 300 points for 7<sup>th</sup> grade grades, and 300 points for the SEHS exam for a total of 900 points.
- **BRC Findings:** The BRC focused on several concerns that were voiced among members and echoed during public comments regarding the current rubric. These include that an "A" at one school is not the same as an "A" at another school, giving schools with lower grading scales an advantage. Some felt using a percentage instead of grade would solve that problem. However, as one BRC member noted, this poses a separate problem for private and home schooled students. Some felt that tightening the point spread between the grades would be a more fair system that didn't issue such a harsh penalty for students who had one or two "Bs," and would allow more good students to get into these elite schools. There is also concern around more girls than boys successfully testing and gaining admission into a SEHS, which raised the question if the gender divide can be addressed through changing the rubric. There was general consensus across the BRC that elementary in-school counseling initiatives and early targeting of high potential males should be used to help address the gender inequity. In all, 9 different scenarios were examined and, while there seemed to be the most positive energy behind tightening the point spread for grades (75 for an A, 60 for a B, and 45 for a C), no clear consensus was reached.

- **BRC Recommendation:** The BRC did not reach a consensus on reweighting the SEHS rubric. The BRC recommends that CPS continue to study this issue.
  
- **Standardizing Grading Scale City wide**
  - **Background:** Historically, each school has been allowed to set its own grading scale.
  - **2010-2011 Policy:** Each school set its own grading scale.
  - **BRC Findings:** Allowing each school to set its own grading scale creates an added layer of complication for SEHS admissions. Because each school is unique, a 92 at one school might be an “A” where it would be a “B” at another school. Many parents and school administrators feel this gives their students an unfair disadvantage. They feel they are being penalized because their grading scales are more rigorous. However, they don’t want to diminish the rigor of the program, they just want a level playing field for their children.
  - **BRC Recommendation:** The BRC believes standardizing the grading scale is an important step towards creating equity in the selection process and, as such, the BRC strongly recommends that the Board adopt a universal grading scale for all CPS schools.
  
- **Principal Discretion**
  - **Background:** In December of 2008, the Board adopted a policy which gave formal guidelines to a previously informal Principal Discretion process. These guidelines defined the number of discretionary selections each principal received (5% of the prior year’s incoming class), and set forth acceptable reasons to select a student for discretionary purposes (unique skills or abilities, activities demonstrating social responsibility, extenuating circumstances, demonstrated ability to overcome hardship, and sibling consideration).
  - **2010-2011 Policy:** The 2010-2011 admission process was similar to the 2008-2009 policy, allotting 5 % of entry level seats for principal selections. However, the new policy also adopted new controls, including a principal affidavit stating there had been no improper contact with any elected official regarding a Principal Discretion application, or any other undue influence. Applications for Principal Discretion seats were also subject to review by an independent review committee for compliance with published selection guidelines and an auditable review system designed to ensure principals’ review of every Principal Discretion application submitted to their school.

- **BRC Findings:** The BRC found the current process to be an improvement over the past practice and, therefore, acceptable. However, the BRC believes Central Office review should be scaled back and focus on compliance to the guidelines vs. direct review and evaluation of each pick (is multi-person review committee and principal interview process really necessary?). In addition, the BRC considered allowing principals the flexibility to reserve a few picks for students who didn't have an opportunity to apply through the general application process and participate on the standardized entrance exam, such as people who moved after the application process commenced and testing occurred. The BRC alternatively considered a recommendation to provide these students with another path to gain admission into these schools. Among the considered alternative admission paths were a Central Office allotment of a small percentage of seats for these circumstances. The consensus was that an applicant should have to apply directly at the Office of Academic Enhancement (OAE) for these spots and they should be first offered seats at schools seeking to improve diversity and academic standing. However, this process should not be an option at schools where there is an abundance of qualified applicants in waiting.
- **BRC Recommendation: The BRC recommends that CPS maintain the existing SEHS Principal Discretion process, and consider simplify the review process.**
- **Number of School Choices on the Application**
  - **Background:** Historically, students have been asked to rank up to 4 schools on the SEHS application.
  - **2010-2011 Policy:** Same as in previous years.
  - **BRC Findings:** There is a desire to give more choice to families. There was concern about allowing students to pick all 9 choices for several reasons. For most families, all 9 schools are not realistically in their consideration sets, mostly due to location. Rather than have families rank all 9 and start turning down offers they are disappointed with, the BRC felt that 6 schools would give families the flexibility to put down their dream choices in addition to a few more practical choices just in case the student doesn't perform as well on the entrance exam as they anticipate.
  - **BRC Recommendation: The BRC recommends changing the number of choices on the application to 6.**

### **Magnet and Selective Enrollment Issues**

- **Factors going into SES Variable**
  - **Background:** SES variable was used for the first time in 2010-2011 Policy.



- **2010-2011 Policy:** The 2010-2011 Admission policy used 5 factors to define the SES variable. These include median family income, adult educational attainment, percent of owner occupied homes, percent of single parent homes, and percent of homes speaking a language other than English.
  - **BRC Findings:** The BRC was specifically asked to look at this issue to offer a recommendation on the right factors to include in the census variable. Looking at the data, the BRC was most concerned about the decline in African American acceptances in the 2010-2011 admission cycle. Multiple options were explored (independently and in concert): a) removing the language variable, b) adding a school performance variable, c) looking at factors that had been used in other districts, d) changing the rank/tier percentages, and e) the effect of cut scores. The committee moved in the direction of maintaining the aspects of the current policy now in place while attempting to introduce elements that would further improve the outcomes in the desired direction. A school performance variable was added to the current 5 factors, essentially a measure of average school performance in each census tract. This did help to bring in more African American students, but not significantly, unless the rank/tier percentage was also shifted to 30/70. Additional census factors were considered, including estimated home values, as a more accurate measure of economic parity and resources measure than incomes. Of all scenarios examined, three things seemed to increase the African American population. They include removing the language variable from the SES formula, increasing the tier percentage, and reducing cut scores (independently or in concert). However, removing the language variable was observed to likely have a negative effect on the Latino population. Moreover, increasing the tier percentage greatly increases the number of high scoring students who would not likely receive an offer to attend any SEHS, and eliminating cut scores to the levels needed to realize increased diversity has historically been met with significant resistance from the principals. The BRC agreed that maintaining these schools' high performance is very important.
  - **BRC Recommendation:** The BRC could not reach consensus on the best course of action to obtain the desired outcomes. However, the BRC recommends that CPS continue to evaluate the outcomes on an annual basis and continue to work on identifying a viable solution that will ensure that CPS magnet and selective enrollment schools reflect the CPS student population.
- **Address verification at the time of application**
    - **Background and 2010-2011 Policy:** The admissions process assigns students to a tier based on their address at the time of application. However, there is no verification

of this address at the time of application. Addresses are only verified at the time of enrollment.

- **BRC Findings:** Parents and community members raised a concern regarding the need to put controls in place to eliminate potential fraud. This could include students who are currently enrolled in schools through proximity considerations although they do not actually reside within the proximity at the time of application or enrollment, and students who are enrolled with a lower score when assigned to a tier that they do not actually live in, etc.
- **BRC Recommendation:** The BRC recommends requiring proof of address upon acceptance to a school.

- **NCLB Process**

- **Background and 2010-2011 Policy:** An additional 100 seats were created and offered for NCLB transfers during the second round of SEHS admissions. This program identified high performing students at the lowest performing 87 CPS neighborhood schools, and invited them to apply to one of 4 schools (Whitney Young, Payton, Northside, and Jones). These 4 schools were given extra resources to help address any needs that these students would have, whether it was learning study skill, additional counseling, etc.
- **BRC Findings:** While the BRC agrees with the intent of the NCLB Program, it is concerned about the way the NCLB program was implemented at Selective Enrollment High Schools.
- **BRC Recommendation:** The BRC recommends aligning the NCLB application process with the general education application process, ensuring that all students must test for the program. CPS should develop a targeted marketing and recruitment campaign to encourage high application rates, and resources should be put toward enrichment programs to prepare these students for the rigor of SEHS. Instead of using a set number per class, CPS should use a percentage of the incoming class as a target for admissions. Finally, there must be principal accountability behind the extra funds for NCLB support efforts. Students should be monitored for success, and best practices should be identified.

- **Handling candidates that don't respond to offers**

- **Background and 2010-2011 Policy:** In the 2010-2011 admission year, students were given one offer, and had a time limit to respond to that offer. If they didn't respond to an offer, it was treated as a "decline," and they were placed back into the

admission pool for a second chance. Some students who never responded got as many as 4 offers over the course of the admissions process.

- **BRC Findings:** Over the course of the entire admissions process, running repeated rounds to handle students who did not respond initially became very cumbersome from a processing standpoint. It slows down the overall admission process and keeps CPS from being able to make offers to students who really want to go to a selective school.
- **BRC Recommendation:** The BRC recommends that students who don't respond to offers stay in the active pool for 2 rounds of offers, and also thinks there should be a "please remove me from future consideration" option on the acceptance letter in addition to "accept."

- **Timelines**

- **Background and 2010-2011 Policy:** Due to December adoption of the admission policy and process changes along the way, the acceptances were on slightly different timelines this year than they have been in the past.
- **BRC Findings:** The changing deadlines and overall timeline was very difficult for parents, because they would like to see what all of their options are before they make any decisions.
- **BRC Recommendation:** The BRC recommends that notification and admission timelines for all programs should be closely aligned, so parents can look at all of their choices when making a decision.

- **Outreach**

- **Background and 2010-2011 Policy:** Currently, outreach to elementary schools occurs from both OAE and Selective Enrollment High Schools.
- **BRC Findings:** Elementary schools are the gatekeepers to SEHS. It is critical that all elementary schools have a SEHS program awareness, where counselors are knowledgeable about the programs, are identifying talented youth early, and encouraging all students to apply for the highest potential schools that match each student. Counselors should be able to help steer students to appropriate SEHS application choices based on the student's individual scores and help students and parents through the application process. In addition, past years' SEHS cut scores for these schools should be published online and be widely available to make sure

that students know their chances of gaining acceptance at the more competitive schools.

- **BRC Recommendation:** The BRC recommends that CPS institute a robust outreach program to encourage and educate promising students at underperforming schools to apply to Selective Enrollment High Schools.

- **Students with Disabilities**

- **Background and 2010-2011 Policy:** Currently, accommodations are made for students with disabilities when qualifying to sit for the elementary selective enrollment and SEHS entrance exams, during the testing process, and in the admissions process.
- **BRC Findings:** There is significant confusion about the way the process works for students with disabilities. More information needs to be provided to the students with disabilities about the process by which children with IEPs are evaluated and admitted. There should be a special breakout in the “Options for Knowledge” guide that talks explicitly about the policy, and outreach to the special education community to encourage students to attend. Further, appropriate resources must be provided to these children once they agree to attend.
- **BRC Recommendation:** The BRC recommends CPS engage in an education campaign to educate parents of qualifying students with disabilities about the selective enrollment elementary and high school processes.

- **Transportation**

- **Background and 2010-2011 Policy:** Currently, some level of free transportation is provided to most magnet elementary and all selective enrollment elementary programs.
- **BRC Findings:** The BRC believes firmly that transportation is critical to the ongoing success and diversity of these programs. Without transportation, the BRC believes that the hard won gains at CPS's most diverse schools would very quickly fade away. If transportation is at risk, CPS should help organize a transportation fee for parents to continue bussing, using a sliding scale that reflects a parent's ability to pay. Transportation can be also used as a tactic to help integrate schools in racially isolated neighborhoods, notwithstanding the implementation of race-neutral admissions criteria. To that end, CPS should look at targeting certain schools with additional transportation to see if the district can affect that change.

- **BRC Recommendation: The BRC strongly recommends maintaining transportation for Magnet and Selective enrollment schools.**